



## Scripted Bodies: Reading the Spectacle of Jacob Wrestling the Angel

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*This article argues that by reading the spectacle of Jacob's struggle with the angel/man in Genesis 32:22-32, we might explore how the difficulties of representing human and divine male bodies are also bound up with certain scriptings of what these bodies can mean. This is not to simply map biblical characters onto modern masculinities, but to focus on the "technologies of the self" that are involved in reading in the present, a type of "pre-posterous" reading (Bal, 2008) of these biblical patriarchs who inhabit a textual world that has historically been a part of constructing our conceptions of how social, political and theological textualities structure everyday life. I am concerned with how such representations are formed by interpretation and, if such interpretations are to become more androcritical, this includes the necessary acknowledgment of a poetic-ethic double-bind in deconstructive reading and retelling.<sup>1</sup>*

The Bible writes our flesh, its meanings and possibilities. But writing is nothing if it is not read, and the distinction between writing and reading opens a space for movement, for a field of energy. This, indeed, is the field of religion, in which believers are bound (*religare*) over to the reading, again and again (*relegere*), of the texts by which they are both bound and set free. (Loughlin, 2006, p. 381)

### ***Struggling with the Corpus***

In what is now a well rehearsed move in postmodern discourse, "there is nothing outside the text" (even though, in scenes that mirror some of the quests of modern biblical scholarship, there is much debate over what Jacques Derrida "originally meant" by his statement "*il n'y pas de hors-texte*"); our perceptions of representation and signification are characterized by what Derrida calls a "general writing." If a "general writing," and, for the purposes of this article, biblical texts in particular, can be said to communicate the meanings and possibilities of corporeal, enacted and performed bodies, how are "we"<sup>2</sup> to understand the textual constructions of divine and human male bodies that men and women are bound to read again and again? If biblical depictions of male patriarchal power have had enormous cultural influence across the years in which the bible has been sourced as an authoritative text (with authoritative interpretations), then it is not simply

believers and bible readers who are bound into a intertextuality of which this bible is part and who are forced to stretch the limits and ligatures of the influence of these particular texts. Feminist scholar and poet, Alicia Ostriker, understands her revisionary work as trying to locate herself “with respect to the looming male tradition of religion, myth, philosophy, and literature” (1993, p. 27) highlighting that the bible “is the ultimate authority for so many other texts; and, what is more, we can observe within biblical narrative the actual process of patriarchy constructing itself. We watch the Law of the Father gathering its material and building itself up, bit by bit, layer upon layer” (1993, p. 121). However, like any artefact that is constructed from that strangest and most potent of materials, language, there are points of articulation where structures break down and the materials can be arranged otherwise to produce a different reading.

This article argues that by reading the spectacle of Jacob’s struggle with his adversary in Genesis 32:22-32<sup>3</sup> in particular, we might explore how the difficulties of representing and inscribing human and divine male bodies are also bound up with certain scriptings of what these bodies can *mean*. This is not to simply map biblical characters onto modern masculinities, but to focus on the “technologies of the self” that are involved in reading in the present, a type of “pre-posterous” reading (Bal, 2008) of these biblical patriarchs who inhabit a textual world that has historically been a part of constructing our conceptions of how social, political and theological textualities structure everyday life. Biblical sources have also influenced the *representations* of these realities. I am concerned with how such representations are formed by interpretation and, if such interpretations are to become more androcritical (after but extending the work of Daniel Patte, 1995), this includes the necessary acknowledgment of a poetic-ethic double-bind in deconstructive reading and retelling. By demonstrating that poetic retellings of biblical narratives enact an artifice that operates in the dynamic space between reading and writing we are more able to foreground the poesis of interpretation. In this way, the process of interpretation is always a double-move; it both frames and constitutes the object that is being interpreted, and, in relation, constitutes the subject as interpreter. This shall be further explored in Mieke Bal’s concept of “envisioning” as interpretation below. However, this is not to argue for an essentialist nature for either subject (interpreter) or object (biblical text). Both parties are, in some senses, undecideable, and are static for only as long as it takes for a reading to form and be performed between them. With this in mind, I shall be arguing for a sense of “relational masculinities,” masculinities performed and constituted in relation to figurations of maleness within biblical texts and to their reception through poetic retelling and interpretation.

In order to draw such conclusions, I will be gathering resources from an interdisciplinary array of thought, garnered from biblical studies, literary and cultural theory, and gender studies to centre on the difficulties of seeing, reading and writing the bodies of Jacob and his opponent in Genesis 32. This multi-dimensional reading process is not without its problems. Biblical scholar Jennifer Glancy (1998) has raised questions as to how the concepts clustered around the term “the male gaze” have been used problematically in a predominantly text-based hermeneutics. Thus section one of this article is concerned with the ancient problem of how reading enables the reader to see or gaze or glimpse textual bodies in the “mind’s eye,” asking questions

of how the written and gendered bodies of the wrestling protagonists are presented and what implications this has for the difficulties surrounding the representation of male bodies more generally. Mieke Bal's work on "envisioning" goes some way to answering Glancy's concerns and I use W. J. T. Mitchell's (1986) extensive work on "iconicity" to legitimate the use of visual studies terminology to understand a "biblical visuality."

If section one is an attempt to "gaze" upon male bodies in biblical texts, section two engages with the work of Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, Björn Krondorfer, and Philip Culbertson, to think about how envisioning both the divine and the human male body is denied, in a complex double-bind of affirmation and negation concerning the meanings and possibilities of such imaged bodies. A relational masculinity is never simply a one-to-one resemblance. There are unsettling paradoxes in trying to "gaze" on and read this wrestling bout and we are not granted an equal view of the protagonists. Although Jacob names the place of his wounding/blessing "Peniel" because "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Gen. 32:30), the bible sets up irreconcilable contradictions between the visible and invisible God. According to Exodus, within the veiled space of the "tent of meeting," "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (33:11). A few lines later, however, as Moses intercedes for his people asking YHWH to "Show me your glory, I pray" (33:18), YHWH warns that "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (33:20). And yet the writer of Psalm 27 yearns for a visible presence; "'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his / face! / Your face, LORD, do I seek'" (27: 8). In another scene at "the tent of meeting," the LORD comes down in a pillar of cloud (Num. 12:5) and speaks with Aaron and Miriam. He warns them not to speak against his "servant Moses" because, "With him I speak face to face— / clearly, not in riddles; / and he beholds the form of the / LORD" (Num. 12:8). Following Elaine Scarry's work (1987), I shall argue that it is only through the voice and the "touch" or "strike" that renames and wounds Jacob that the divine adversary is given "substance." As Scarry notes, "God's invisible presence is asserted, made visible, in the perceivable alterations He brings about in the human body" (p. 183). In the struggle at the Jabbok, the difficulty of making meaning with the textual event is played out in the inscribing of the wound on Jacob's (textual) body. Envisioning "biblical visuality" in this scene, then, has to necessarily focus on the marking of Jacob's body; although this scene seems to depict a physical, bodily struggle (something many poetic retellings of this scene pick up on), the body of the adversary (alternately interpreted at different points in this story's reception history as man, angel, or God) remains veiled, even as Jacob seems to hold him in his grasp.

In order to demonstrate the productive tensions that such visibility/invisibility engenders, I use Michael Symmons Roberts' poem "Choreography" as a retelling of the textual spectacle of the wrestling bout and as an "intergenesis," a term that Gary Phillips proposes for reading "that is the act of rewriting or inserting texts within some more or less established network. Meaning does not lie 'inside' texts but rather in the space 'between' texts" (Aichele & Phillips, 1995, p. 14). This intergenesis intervenes in our reading process, adding more interpretive text, and demonstrates that the reader is always responding to more than simply the textual marks in front of them. This is the space between reading and writing that offers the possibility of the "otherwise" of relational interpretation. The poem enacts the performances of

the male bodies in this textual spectacle as undecideable and fluid as they slip and slide between visibility and invisibility, deconstructing the fixing power of the gaze. Although the notions of undecideability and performativity have almost become theoretical truisms in postmodern gender studies, there is still work to be done; how can reading and interpreting biblical male bodies be deployed in more complex acknowledgements of how such texts are recited and rewritten in relation to modern masculinities? If we are “bound” to keep reading these texts that continue to exert some authoritative influence (whether literary or theological, or a complex manifestation of both) over “Western” cultural imaginaries, how might an analysis of the difficulty of deciding upon what biblical male bodies mean assist in restructuring the possibilities of performing masculinities?

### *Gazing on the “Textual Spectacle” of Jacob and the Angel*

The important ideas that have clustered around Laura Mulvey’s influential exploration of the concept of the “male gaze” (1975) are operational in the interstices between critical theory, biblical studies, and critical men’s studies in religion and I use them to explore how reading and writing the bible may function as both a scripting and reciting of male bodies, and as a crisis in the representation of male bodies. The aim is to get close enough to the texts to see the cracks and fissures appear, to stretch those textual bindings in an intergenesis that inserts new reading/writings in the form of poems and that invite us to watch and encounter “deconstruction happening” (Beal, 1997, p. 2). However, in trying to “see” textual imagery, it is also important to acknowledge that variations of the word/image problem have caused philosophers, theologians, artists, and poets consternation for millennia. From the earliest religious concerns about being created in the “image” and “likeness” (Gk. *eikon*) of God (Gen. 1:26-2:24), through the Augustan poet Horace and his *Ars Poetica* to Archibald MacLeish’s poem of the same name, the necessary confusion between words and images has animated how we read and write, communicate and use imaginative language. Horace’s idea that “as is painting so is poetry” (*ut pictura poesis*) and MacLeish’s sense that “A poem should be wordless / as the flight of birds” (1985) rely on implicit theories that link image and word indissociably. Shorthand statements like, “I saw it in my mind’s eye,” or “she has remarkable poetic vision,” hint at the long history of metaphorically conflating concepts of “seeing” with linguistic cognition and understanding. It is beyond the bounds of this article to introduce the history of thought on perception and imagination but aspects of this conflation are certainly at work in reading and interpreting biblical texts.

To get a little closer to the problem, the subtle but decisive differences between “resemblance” and “representation” are constantly in tension (cf. Mitchell, 1986). Mary Daly’s famous quote that “if God is a man, then man is God” demonstrates an understanding that men, to whom it was (and is) deemed possible and desirable, have attempted to *resemble* the attributes of culturally conditioned gods/God and to organize social structures to this symmetrical end. However, in this article, I want to problematize this truism a little to show that it is in the complex negotiations of *representation*, particularly through interpretive maneuvers, that sustains or deconstructs such an ideology. By shifting the focus to *representations* of human and divine male bodies, there is an inherent admission that men *cannot*

*resemble* gods/God, a source of asymmetrical anxiety and crisis for conceptions of masculinity. The interpretative gap that opens up between “world” and “representation,” and which has to be repressed in order for any model of resemblance to operate, is a source of anxious threat for masculine identities. This anxiety can be traced through looking again at the signs, the designations, of Jacob’s struggle with the stranger.

### *The “Visual Category” in Reading and Retelling Biblical Male Bodies*

Since Mulvey’s film studies essay, her psychoanalytic concept of “the male gaze” has been used within different disciplinary environments, and appears with regularity in gender criticism and visual and film studies (Bal, 2002; Collins, 2010; Silverman, 1992). Critiquing and extending the theoretical reach and usefulness surrounding the “male gaze” has started in biblical and theological studies (Collins, 2010; Culbertson, 2009; Glancy, 1998) and I frame this section around an attempt to engage with Jennifer Glancy’s questions:

is it legitimate to draw on an essentially visual category in the analysis of written texts? Moreover, is vision a natural category common to all human cultures, or is vision historical, embedded in culture? And if the experience of vision, of seeing, is culturally constructed, is it legitimate to draw on the notion of the gaze in a transhistorical manner? (Glancy, 1998, p. 64)

These are provocative and significant questions and Glancy does not propose extensive answers within her article. But she has set my own thinking on important trajectories in linking the spectacle of the textually perceived biblical male body with the compositions and performance of male interpreters writing their own texts *in the present*. This necessarily entails analysis of the contingencies of reading in the present while trying to avoid the dangers of attributing a transhistorical essence to such a reading gaze. However, if I am to explore what is at work in what Glancy terms “biblical viscosity,” I disagree with her point that biblical scholars (or any other rewriters of bible) “are likely to find that the disciplinary gaze, as articulated by Foucault and Sartre, has a greater explanatory potential than the gendered gaze derived from feminist film criticism” (1998, p. 73). Explanatory potential lies in different combinations of thinking on the gaze, rather than a single type; for example, the “disciplinary gaze” is arguably bound up with this gaze being gendered as patriarchal and able to construct regimes of signification around the male body as *readable* and *recited* but only in certain ways. Following Ken Stone (who follows some of Foucault’s own thinking on a disciplinary gaze and the concomitant “technologies of the self”), “the subject of biblical interpretation does not only precede but is also formed, in part, through the practices of reading” (2009, p. 204). These relational, constitutional practices can be found in the complexities of “gazing” on the textual bodies of Jacob and the “angel.”

As Glancy suggests, there is no point-by-point relationship between mental imagery or representation and physical material bodies. But we have been entrained and encultured by textualities, by textures of perception. We expect meaning through language and image; we use terms like “the mind’s eye” or “body language” to confuse terms into constructive metaphors; “Do we ‘see’ when we read? Or is this

vision a metaphor that displaces the fact that we *don't* see when we read?" (Glancy, 1998, p. 67). Textual bodies are not there in any materially real sense but when reading certain literatures, we can render their effects on our own embodied reactions whether that be titillation, repulsion, fear, or another complex response. We are able to acknowledge that a literary depiction does not necessarily conform to or resemble "the world," but the complex processes by which we envisage the body and its acts, its body language, demonstrates how we attempt *articulation*, both in writing and communicating about bodies and imagining a body's movement in our own literary recognition. This articulation *is* contingent and not transhistorical; as Nelson Goodman argues, "realistic representation...depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation" which "reduces all symbolic forms, and perhaps even all acts of perception, to culturally relative constructions or interpretations" (quoted in Mitchell, 1986, p. 65). Seeing does have disciplinary connotations as Glancy argues (what one is not supposed to see, inculcated blind spots, the regimes of signification that surround the meaning of what is seen, and so forth) but retaining the dimension of a gendered gaze still yields important insights as well.

Mieke Bal unpacks some of the difficulties of using the concept of the "gaze" that will take us further in exploring the tensions of reading male bodies in a contemporary sense of "biblical visuality":

The concept of the gaze has a variety of backgrounds. It is sometimes used as an equivalent of the "look," indicating the positions of the subject doing the looking. As such it points to a position, real or represented. It is also used in distinction from the "look," as a fixed and fixating, colonizing, mode of looking—a look that objectifies, appropriates, disempowers, and even, possibly, violates. In its Lacanian sense...it is most certainly different from—if not opposed to—its more common usage as the equivalent of the "look" or a specific version of it. The Lacanian "gaze" is, most succinctly, the visual order (equivalent to the symbolic order, or the visual part of that order) in which the subject is "caught." In this sense it is an indispensable concept through which to understand all cultural domains, including text-based ones. The "gaze" is the world looking (back) at the subject. (Bal, 2002, p. 36)

It is this Lacanian gaze that animates Mulvey's film studies essay but here Bal has included the "text-based cultural domains" in which we are caught and bound by the "gaze" as well. However, in order to extend our engagement with Glancy's concerns, Bal notes a further dimension that is linked with but not to be conflated with the gaze: *focalization*. This

indicates neither a *location* of the gaze on the picture plane, nor a *subject* of it, such as either the figure or the viewer. Instead, what becomes visible is the *movement* of the look. In that movement, the look encounters the limitations imposed by the gaze, the visual order. For the gaze dictates the limits of the figures' respective positions as holder of the objectifying and colonizing look, and disempowered object of that look. The tension between the focalizer's movement and these limitations is the true object of analysis. (Bal, 2002, p. 39)

Bal has set up an important generative tension between the “focalizing look” and the “gaze”; what this means for my analysis is that, in the poetic retelling, we can trace this movement of focalization through language and imagery as it comes up against the boundaries of the “visual order.” The poem can look and reread (*relegere*) but only in a tense relationship with the structures of a symbolically inflected gaze. As Deborah Sawyer notes, “the text pre-empts all existence—any space we might think to negotiate has already been anticipated and occupied” (2002, p. 7) and we might say that, similarly, the (textual) gaze already anticipates and disciplines the (textual) focalizing look, surrounding and seducing the subject’s sense of himself. The scripts seem to be given, choreographing the “writing of our flesh” as Loughlin emphasizes in the heading quotation at the beginning of this article, a “dance-writing” that transliterates the body’s movement into graphemes, marks, and textual signs to be read and recited. In what follows then, I acknowledge Glancy’s concerns with the visual “gaze” being used in a biblical studies that is predominantly focused on text-based exegesis, but utilize Bal’s cluster of ideas surrounding “focalization,” “gaze” and the “look” to continue to transgress the text/image boundaries; as Bal notes, “the hypothesis that says readers *envision*, that is, create images from textual stimuli cuts right through semantic theory, grammar, and rhetoric to foreground the presence and crucial importance of *images* in reading” (2002, pp. 37-38). Not only is it legitimate to “draw on an essentially visual category” (Glancy, 1998, p. 64) but “transgressions of the text-image boundaries [are]...the rule rather than the exception (Mitchell, 1986, p. 155). However, the concept of the gendered gaze must be acknowledged to be a form of “pre-posterous” reading, reading the past through the present, and not a transhistorical perspective. With the above in mind, let us turn to a poem that attempts to render Genesis 32:22-32 as a textual spectacle, a “biblical visuality,” and look again at what is marked there.

### *Choreographies*

Michael Symmons Roberts’ poem and intergenesis “Choreography” (2004) reads the Genesis fragment as a violently embodied struggle and narrows the focus to the physicality of the actual fight itself, the wrestling being only portrayed briefly within Genesis itself:

His fist smashes my face.  
That’s no wrestler’s move;  
so it’s bare knuckles now. Okay.

There’s blood in my eye,  
the lid swells to a hood.  
I use my head and butt him.

His lips bloom like a rose,  
but he’s still ticking, clicking  
his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

The poem is written in present-tense throughout with the emphasis on the first-person “I.” Sentences are short and fast, recounting the violent action (bare knuckles, head-butts, gut punches, knees in the jaw, face-dunking, slaps, and finally the enigmatic slipping of the hip “out of its bone-cup”), and metaphorical language is kept to a minimum as the poem circles the performative and spectacular, moving from fight to dance, even if only retrospectively with the realization in one of the concluding stanzas that “that was no stutter, / but a beat. The dance is over.” The poem’s hermeneutics of suspicion doesn’t extend as far as questioning what the strike on the “hollow of the thigh” (Gen. 32:26) might mean, but by detailing the physicality of the fight and then refiguring it as a dance, there is certainly a desire to insert more meaningful description and representation, and thus, by implication, more interpretation into the short lines of the Genesis fragment. It is unclear what the result of reframing this incident as a dance might be. Jacob is not renamed (or even named) by the end of the poem; the only result seems to be his limp, from a dance to which he was not invited but into which he was brutally forced. However, if we use this poem as an intergenesis, an interpretation that asserts and inserts its constructed qualities into the spaces between biblical text and reader so that we can read all of these intertexts together, we can interpret the poem in complex ways; not only is the poem an initial response to an oft-retold biblical story in itself but it also helps foreground a type of reading report, displaying a need to imagine this textual spectacle more fully, from a text that, as Eric Auerbach famously commented, “remains mysterious and ‘fraught with background’” (1953, pp. 11-12). In a sense, the poem offers an *extra*-biblical visuality, a need for more imagery that the reticence of the biblical text provokes in the reader. We want to know what is happening here and this also means we want to see what is happening. Where the Genesis text emphasizes that Jacob was left alone (32:25) before being accosted by the stranger, even though the audience has to be a constituent part of this solitary figure in order for his being set apart to begin to make meaningful sense, the poem is more aware of its audience and foregrounds the focalization on the spectacle of the struggle. The quick descriptive sentences jar us into looking at the acts; their rapid articulation generates the imagined physicality of the bout.

Because the poem opens without any explanation for the assault (and with no hint that this is a retelling of Genesis 32), our focalization for much of the poem is on the bodies themselves. Jacob is present through movement and articulation within a kind of textual *spectaculam*<sup>4</sup> and, as we shall go on to explore below, heteronormative focalization is securely surrounded and choreographed by a male gaze’s cultural signifiers—male bodies caught in the spectacle of violence. It is deemed legitimate for men to look upon male bodies within an encultured heteronormative gaze only when they are performed in certain ways. However, this move is double-edged. Placing male bodies into this spectacle involves interpreting them or constituting them in ways that the “male gaze” can legitimate but, at the same time, it also demonstrates their performance, the necessary choreographies of their articulation. As Paul M. Collins argues, this “means that the classic iteration of male gaze/female object is brought into question. The process of deconstruction is reinforced when males are ‘spectacularized’ or the male body is fetishized in cinema or through visual images, and is foregrounded as spectacle in sport and popular music (2010, p. 91). This is the point where we, as readers and interpreters, start to



get too close to the male body's textual visibility. In the next section, I shall use some of Judith Butler's thinking on the performativity of gender to explore how this performance of male bodily signifiers is also bound up with denying the consequences of the male body's "to-be-looked-at-ness." But, at this point in the poem, just as the spectacle of male violence seems to limit the reader's focalization of any other signifier, a question is raised.

"Choreography" as a performance of reading and retelling Genesis 32, extends the detail from the brevity of the text, and yet more detail does not necessarily lead to more decideability. The poem questions the "man's" incommunicative nature; he clicks and ticks, marking time as if in a dance, but not saying a word until the colloquial "*You had me there...I had to do your leg to settle things.*" As much as this is a focalized spectacle in the constituted "religious" space (*religare/relegere*) between reading and writing, the poem also remains reticent about designating a meaning to this biblical text. There is even an excision of the motif of the renaming of Jacob after the strike on the hollow of the thigh, arguably revaluating this portion of Genesis, for without the name change from Jacob to Israel as the result of meeting God *panim el panim* (face to face), meaning becomes even more difficult to ascribe. We have been allowed to watch the struggle, the extra-biblical visuality of the poem shaping our focalization on these male bodies, but, as I shall discuss below, at the moment in which the male body becomes most visualized, or gazed at and written upon, this body becomes less available or even denied. The poem finishes with the angel's disappearance, refusing to tell Jacob his name.

#### *Denying the Look: Revealing and Re-veiling*

If "Choreography" attempted to fill in the gaps and show us the struggling bodies of Jacob and the "angel," it was also aware, by the final lines, that this focalization could not be sustained. Why might this be? Philip Culbertson demonstrates one of the significant problems with talking about the heteronormative male body; in order to maintain patriarchal potency the vulnerable realities of the male body's constitution must be elided. Thus "patriarchy is built upon the assumption that a male body is a text which will reject all attempts by other men to read it. To accept such an attempt would be to destroy the basis of power and control" (2009, p. 117). Where Laura Mulvey argued that the feminine object is signified and contained by "to-be-looked-at-ness" (1975, p. 11), the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the male body becomes a point of crisis and problematic identity formation. As Björn Krondorfer has also explored (specifically in what he terms "confessiographies," or men writing themselves), writing the male body circles what he terms a *non-absence*; that is to say, that "although the male body is always *in* the text, it is *not present* in the text as a consciously gendered body" (2008, pp. 270-271). The male writer assumes the facticity of his own body and thus need not question its constitution. That the imagined constitution of the male body is also often ignored in critical exegeses is tied up with averting the gaze from *other* male bodies as well as one's own; in Culbertson's thinking this amounts to an encultured refusal to read heterosexual male bodies. Reading (and retelling or rewriting) emphasizes the created or scripted nature of meanings engendered by male bodies; it raises the specter that the meanings of this body could be constituted or versioned otherwise. This section explores how the male body can be absented in interpretation, an absence that, as

argued above, is constituted by the parameters of the “male gaze” and that is an absence that colludes with the technologies of patriarchal power.

The idea that the “gaze” constitutes both viewed and viewer is again key to this argument. The reading subject who is constituted in the dynamic space between texts, between reading and writing, is not a unified, autonomous, disembodied will, able to pick between random signifiers at will but is bound to cultures and texts in ambiguous ways. Judith Butler’s work emphasizes that reciting these bindings and boundaries serves an important function in creating a sense of gendered subjecthood. According to Butler, “as a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (2008, p. 14); it is only through the recitation of certain norms that gendered identities are offered the illusion of stability. In this way, reciting biblical texts has the potential to fix perceived norms simply through relational reiterative interpretive practice. Reciting and rehearsing hegemonic masculinities through these interpretations also risks part of the transhistorical essentialism of which Jennifer Glancy warns. An androcritical biblical *intergenesis* then becomes much more than practicing an advocacy interpretation; it also involves attentiveness to the fact that, as we have noted, “the subject of biblical interpretation does not only precede but is also formed, in part, through the practices of reading” (Stone, 2009, p. 204) and, to a certain extent, is also constituted by the resources and citations which he deploys. The possibilities that are written onto male bodies are constituted by the interpreter/focalizer and this interpreter/focalizer also constitutes themselves by seeing and re-cognizing certain elements in the other. As Butler highlights,

the act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (1988, p. 526)

This is not to argue that there is a single script from which genders are performed, but it is to note that there are hegemonic scripts that incorporate certain elements of human experience into certain codifications and choreographies in order to make meaning from them. The scripts need actors to rehearse and perform them and, in turn, the actors use the scripts to communicate and articulate their signifying languages. This does not disallow scribbling in the margins or ad-libbing, but if these moments are to be meaningful, they are also constituted by linguistic and symbolic elements within canonical scripts. The element that is most often absented in the scripts (and scriptures) of the divine male body and, by extension, in representations of the bodies of Jacob and the “angel” (if this is what we take the Hebrew “*ish*” to designate here) is their genitalia. This symbol *and* embodied reality is part of a complex refusal for the male body to signify “to-be-looked-at-ness” and yet, in order for the symbolic functions of the penis/phallus to be deployed and rehearsed, this symbol seems to require affirmation (visibility) as well as negation (invisibility). How does this negotiation operate when reading the “biblical visuality” of Genesis 32, acknowledging, again, that we are reading somewhat “preposterously”?

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has done extensive and significant work on the difficulties early Israelite religion had in both affirming that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, whilst prohibiting the representation of this divine image. He has specifically used the story of Jacob and the “angel” as an example of “unmanning”, which, when read together with Symmons Roberts’ poem, suggests that maintaining Jacob as an unproblematic figure of patriarchy is a difficult task. In the same way that “Choreography” finished without a victorious Jacob, Eilberg-Schwartz notes that “Jacob leaves the struggle with a limp and is unable to discover the being’s name, and he himself does not say he prevailed, but that his life was preserved, describing it as a stand-off rather than a victory. In fact, the name Israel may originally have meant ‘and God prevailed’” (2009, p. 174). But what of the wounding, the marking, which occurred during the spectacle of the poem? It was focalized as

[he]taps the hollow of my thigh,  
and something gives. He helps  
me up. He’s damaged me.

Somehow he’s slid my hip  
out of its bone-cup, left me  
clipped and limping.

The male gaze can cope with a wounded warrior image as a strong identifier but the nature of this wound might give pause for thought; “The thigh or loins is frequently a euphemism for the penis. Jacob’s offspring, for example are said to spring from his thigh (Gen. 46:26; Exod. 1:5). Recall also the oaths taken by placing the hand “under the loins” (Gen. 24:2, 9; 47:29)” (Eilberg-Schwartz, 2009, p. 174).<sup>5</sup> As soon as Jacob is recognized as a man, “he must be marked on the genitals, signifying his submission to God. Jacob only becomes Israel through an act of partial emasculation” (Eilberg-Schwartz, 2009, p. 176). Elsewhere, Eilberg-Schwartz argues that this emasculation and feminization of Israelite men became necessary in a relationship imagined as a marriage covenant with a monotheistic male God. Suppressing the homoerotic impulse could then take two forms; “a prohibition against depicting God (veiling the body of God) and the feminization of men” where “women were deemed impure and men were feminized so as to disrupt what in this religious culture was a natural complementarity between the divine male and human females” (1996, p. 37). In this way, the invisibility of the divine stranger, and the veiling of the “biblical visibility” of the mark made to Jacob’s genitals work together in both poem and biblical text, rendering the bodies both present (even more so in the physicality of the poem) and absent by assenting to the “dance-writing” that structures the male gaze and halts any focalization on the penis. As Mulvey highlighted, “according to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like” (1975, p. 12). This reluctance might stem from the fact that looking at, or reading, the penis actually entails meaningful risk:

The penis will not behave: now a penis, now a phallus, the one when we wish the other, it is itself a text that we can barely read, even with double vision. It seems not one thing but two. The phallus is haunted by the penis and vice versa. It has no unified social identity, but is fragmented by ideologies of race and ethnicity. (Culbertson, 2009, p. 119)

Like Jacob's patriarchy, upheld by YHWH's promises to him that he will father a great nation, looking too closely we begin to see the fissures in the textual fabric. The look has to be denied in order for the phallus to retain its symbolic power. As resemblance between the penis and the phallus cannot be affirmed, so modes of representation that then, conversely, veil any representation have to suffice. As Eilberg-Schwartz has it, the "myths of Noah and Adam and Eve regard shame about nakedness as a foundational moment in the emergence of human culture...to be uncovered is to reintroduce a state of disorder. Culture is preserved by the virtuous sons who cover their father's nakedness" (1996, p. 43).

Although Judith Butler argues that "masculinity and femininity are learned bodily performances that masquerade as natural by invoking bodily markers (primary and secondary sex characteristics) as their signature and guarantee" (Armour & Ville, 2006, p. 5), many biblical texts retain a complex and "fraught background" for such a performance. The performance (and focalization) is often surrounded by a theocratic gaze. Performing the markers of human maleness is thus both guaranteed and regularly undermined by the inherent biblical theology of the text. Deborah Sawyer notes that there are tensions between Israelite law codes and the patriarch narratives such as we find in Genesis where a discernible process of demasculation takes place. Abraham is usurped by God in "his role as father, as protector of his son...along with his role as husband and primary instigator of his wife's pregnancy. The limitations of Abraham's identity, as a patriarch are now clearly defined and subordinate to divine supremacy" (2002, p. 54). Sarah also takes on a more active role than Abraham in her demands that he father a son through Hagar. Tamar ridicules and shames Judah, highlighting his breaking of Levirate law twice (Gen. 38), and yet even this surpassing of the law results in the Davidic line continuing; Sawyer sees these stories as evidence that, although "the biblical texts were no doubt written by men and for men, the maleness affirmed by them is complex rather than purely hegemonic, and they contain an overriding theology that affirms the deity largely at the expense of the autonomy of the male audience" (2002, p. 64). If we read Jacob and his struggle with the divine stranger with this in mind, the marking on his body becomes a complex sign to focalize; if there is a danger that this strike might render him infertile, the irony that this occurs just before he is renamed as Israel would suggest that this divine male can both withhold and guarantee Jacob's potency and masculinity. The anxiety for biblical males (and for male interpreters of these patriarchs) is that it may be unclear as to whether the deity will guarantee or withhold their own performative masculinities. Seeing God "face to face" (Gen 32:30) is an envisaging that might be a denial of the deity's visage, his "to-be-looked-at-ness" and a destruction of the focalizing body (Exod. 33:20; "for no one shall see me and live"); it might also result in a name change that instigates male paternity and patriarchy, as in Jacob's name change to Israel. The "biblical viscosity" that Glancy questions can then become a complex type of

theophany and, within the bible's theological and theocratic backdrop, such theophanies invoke crises in the constitutional elements of the gaze. Reading human and divine male bodies is risky and yet we are bound to go on reading.

To return to the poem once more, we become aware that this "biblical visuality" only allows us to focalize Jacob's body, albeit without lingering over what type of wound has been inflicted upon him. Although the poem seems to fill in a lot of the physical detail that is absent from the Genesis narrative, the man/angel's "divinity" and identity remains unrepresentable. In both versions, the biblical narrative and the poetic retelling, the antagonist is a stranger that is difficult to fit within the "visual order". Symmons Roberts seems to acknowledge this by depicting the assailant as "ticking / clicking his tongue on the roof of his mouth" throughout the struggle, clicking louder as Jacob strikes him harder. It takes Jacob the entirety of the fight to realize that, once he has been wounded and damaged, the angel's clicking was "no stutter, / but a beat. The dance is over." In this way, we are brought up short in our envisioning of the spectacle. Other senses are being engaged.<sup>6</sup> If we take it that Jacob is imagined to be wrestling God by the later redactor of this story who is attempting to explain the aetiology of Peniel and the name Israel, we then have the two attributes that Elaine Scarry understands as the substantiation of God in the "realm of matter"; God's voice and God's altering or wounding of the body. The paradox of male potency explored above remains. Scarry notes that "Genesis is filled not only with the emphatic material reality of the forever multiplying human body, but with God's voice which takes two different forms, a command ("Be fruitful and multiply") and a promise ("You will be fruitful and multiply")" (1987, p. 191). So, just as God's voice intervenes, predicts and promises, in a kind of divine choreography, it is extremely troubling that the wounding of Jacob takes place at exactly the site through which this command might continue to be followed (even though Jacob already has eleven children at this point). As Scarry highlights, "the crowd of eventual humanity resides within the parental body" (p. 192) and it seems that here, as with the Akedah or "sacrifice of Isaac" in Genesis 22, God is almost aborting his own promise and command, even as it is constantly repeated to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, if "the place of man is in the body [and] the place of God is in the voice," (p. 192) then "the body in its most intense presence becomes the substantiation of the most disembodied reality" (p. 194). As Scarry emphasizes, "the human child, the human womb, the human hand, the face, the stomach, the mouth, the genitals (themselves circumcised, marked)—it is in the body that God's presence is recorded" (p. 204). In the wrestling bout of Genesis 32 Jacob's antagonist remains unrepresentable. Our textual envisioning can only really be directed towards Jacob's body which is altered, wounded and marked by the divine assailant. In the Genesis text, Jacob is also renamed as Israel, a name given through the voice of the stranger, another alteration, another type of inscription or writing on the body, a "recording of the elusive voice in the transformation of the material world" (Pyper, 2005, p. 120).

The nuances brought forth by a multi-dimensional exegesis, foreground the fictive reality of Jacob's body as a contested site of signification. Jacob's phallic guarantee has been seriously undermined by his struggle. His "bodily marker" that might serve to naturalize his patriarchal power has been brought into question. This is a strange scene and one that, for the male gaze, is not imbued with the "visual

pleasure” that Mulvey explores in her article as our focalization moves from the obscured, struggling bodies, to where Jacob’s seat of power is almost lost; his “manhood” is damaged and marked and made painfully present. The biblical text will return him to the patriarchal script as the father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel (as Mulvey highlights in her essay, the male character has to be returned to the thrust of the narrative rather than being gazed at for too long in spectacle), but at this point, we can see some of the articulations of both biblical text and its interpretations. Many theological interpretations also rush to place male patriarchy back in power, focusing on God’s blessing to Jacob as Israel, or as with St. Augustine, casting the assailant as a type of Christ figure, or, with Luther, imagining the crippling of Jacob by a dark and powerful divine male (Rogerson, 1992). But if we are to pause this scene before this act is made what might be imagined instead?

### *Conclusion: Narratocracies and Ethico-Poetics in Biblical Interpretation*

The undecideability of what is happening at the Jabbok river is key. As I have highlighted, as much as we might try to “envision” both wrestling bodies in order to begin to confer meaning upon them, each is denied us in different ways. I have argued throughout this article that the ideas clustered around Mieke Bal’s complex of envisioning (look, gaze, focalization) are useful and legitimate to think with when re-reading Genesis 32:22-32. These are not transhistorical concepts but neither are the perceived essentialisms of text and image. As W. J. T. Mitchell argues, “the differences between sign-types are matters of use, habit and convention. The boundary line between texts and images, pictures and paragraphs, is drawn by a history of practical differences in the use of different sorts of symbolic marks, not by a metaphysical divide” (1986, p. 69). I have also muddled the Jabbok waters further in that, following the prompts of the poetic retelling, with its auditory as well as visual imagery, I responded to the difficulties of envisioning the unrepresentable divine body. As much as readers are bound into a complex non-focalization on Jacob’s wounded body—particularly because of the site of the wound and what this might entail for constructions of patriarchal potency—it is only through the wounded, renamed, Jacob-Israel that there is any substantiation of the divine. Re-reading and re-writing on Genesis 32:22-32 helps us pause at its undecideability. This pause, before a meaning is decided upon, is emblematic of what is at stake, and what requires further work, in understanding the author-ities that are revealed and re-veiled during androcritical reading. If we want to read masculinities otherwise, this pause at the Jabbok provides a troubling scene of male performance, human and divine. This involves recognizing that the symbolic marks on male bodies are written and perceived in ways that often elide the troubled fragmentations at the heart of many different performances of masculinity. As we have seen in the above analysis, such marks can allude to ways of representing the invisible formless deity on the male body. In so doing, however, certain wounds also threaten to undermine masculine potency. Imaging the male body as representative of God’s body (an *imago dei*) becomes a much less smooth interpretive move. God does not have a body, but bodies are wounded and altered in the name of God, and these wounds can “unman”; patriarchal power is consistently wounded by the divine male.

Interpretive representations of the bodies of Jacob and the angel can attempt to unite these fragments in a “phallogocentricity” but, as with any sign, this unity is

always haunted by the potential of its fragments to mean otherwise (in Derridean *différance*). The “otherwise” is always present and has to be negated in order to decide upon a meaning. To put it another way, just as biblical interpreters and poets attempt to represent and gaze upon these bodies, as *representation* rather than *resemblance*, they have already become artifice and available for deconstruction. The poetic retelling writes the scene “otherwise.” The spectacle of Jacob and the angel/man wrestling seems to invite us to look, to search for a revelation of masculinity whilst, at the same time, re-veiling of how masculinities might be constituted. As with “Choreography,” we demand a name and no name is given. And, with this, acknowledging that the gaze constitutes the gazer, that “*to figure* is always *to see as*, but not always *to see* or *to make visible*” (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 70), male readers of the bible might have to admit to the many blind-spots in our figurations of masculinities, tracking the traces of male bodily representation which is also always a supplementation for the absence of an essential manhood.

However, underlying these traces and in many ways, making them possible, is the impossibility of totally escaping the “religare,” the bindings of making meanings with these texts. In many scholars’ desire for a postmodern ethics, much important work has been done on Emmanuel Levinas’ demand that we must turn to the undecidable face of the Other, the face that puts our totalizing schema under question, that leaves us in relation to others. But, as we have seen, there is a certain impossible risk in turning to face a biblical Other whose (textual) gaze, whose visage, deconstructs our own movements of focalization. This is not to argue for a simplistic submission to the biblical text but to acknowledge, with Erich Auerbach, that in terms of the possibilities of representing and gazing on truth, the bible

is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of all mankind, will be given their due place within its frame, will be subordinated to it. The Scripture stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favour, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels. (Auerbach, 1953, pp. 14-15)

I have attempted to interject in biblical interpretation with a poetic retelling of Jacob and the “angel” in order to place an intergenesis in that “space for movement” that Gerard Loughlin sees between writing and reading (2006, p. 381), and, for this article, in the space between writing and reading male biblical bodies. If Auerbach’s biblical “autocracy” might be imagined in “terms of a *theocracy* and its aesthetic correlate *narratocracy*,” (Sherwood, 2008, p. 130), a policing of textual signs and what they might mean, a poetic retelling offers interpretive room within such a space. This “space for movement” is also the space that is crisscrossed by different focalizations on the part of interpreters and writers who work within their own contemporary paradigms and who envisage masculinities in ways that can also be read back into and scribbled over the scriptures. Michel de Certeau has explored this strand of the ethico-poetic; he notes how the reader

insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one's body. Ruse, metaphor, arrangement, this production is also an "invention" of the memory. Words become the outlet or product of silent histories... The thin film of writing becomes a movement of strata, a play of spaces. A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place. (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxi)

The choreographies remain but within this dance-writing are spaces to articulate male bodies otherwise. Where Emma Goldman said of the feminist movement in the late nineteenth century, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution," I now ask what kind of dance steps we might perform to keep moving, to keep making (*poesis/têchne*) relational masculinities; as Ken Stone emphasizes, "the 'technology of the self' is thus not so much about the discovery or liberation of one's 'true' self but, rather, about the creation and recreation of the self in its variable relations with itself, with others, and the world" (2009, p. 209) and, as such, is a constant becoming and possibility—and yet, always within limits. Following Certeau's explanation of how reading texts is process of rearranging and inventing through rewriting, a thicker understanding of the *poesis* of interpretation, as outlined here, offers different points of focalization in envisioning the paradoxes of biblical male bodies, both divine and human. Genesis 32: 22-32 becomes an undecideable text that forces a pause in attempting to create masculinities from biblical material.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> This collective “we” is, of course, a dangerous register, including those who might not wish to be included in such a reading position as I take in this article and, similarly, excluding those readers from whom I differ in gender, sexuality, ethnicity, economic status etc. However, it is an attempt at acknowledging that I never read alone and that no reading position is static and fixed (functioning as a postal or zip code from which we might identify an interlocutor). Here, it also functions as an invitation to read together for a short time, even if only the length of this article.

<sup>3</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> Latin, designating the Roman circus, an arena for spectacle and performance.

<sup>5</sup> That the “hollow of the thigh” has a strong possibility of signifying male genitalia (Eilberg-Schwartz, 2009; Eslinger, 1981; Smith, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to one of the anonymous peer reviewers of this article who highlighted that the poem also has an auditory dimension and set my thinking down this route.

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